



Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Study Guide



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Summary

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Summary

The Underground Man begins his narration of events that occurred when he was twenty-four years old. Even at that young age, he is already depressed and antisocial. At work, he never looks anyone in the eye, and he imagines that they look at him with disgust. He vacillates between despising everyone he knows because they are dull-witted and feeling intensely inferior to them. He always feels alienated, conscious of how different he is from everyone else. Occasionally, he grows suddenly indifferent to his problems, becomes briefly chummy with his coworkers, and attributes his usual "intolerance and fastidiousness" to Romanticism.

In a digression from this retrospective narrative, the Underground Man discusses the nature of Russian Romanticism, which he claims is not "translunary" like German or French Romanticism. Russian Romanticism is "to see everything, and to see often incomparably more clearly than our very most positive minds do." Generally, the Russian form of Romanticism is open-minded and practical, concerned with the preservation of "the beautiful and lofty" but also with an eye for self-preservation. The Russian Romantic does not seem to let his Romanticism get in the way of his career: he "wouldn't lift a finger for his ideal" yet believes in this ideal steadfastly. He is at once "loftily honest" and a "scoundrel."

After this explanation, the Underground Man returns to his earlier narrative. At the age of twenty-four, he needs external stimulation to stifle his inner turmoil, and the only external stimulation he can bear is reading. Sometimes he feels the need for "contradictions, contrasts," and he engages

in timid, shameful debaucheries. Afraid of being seen, he frequents shadowy, disreputable places.

One night, after seeing someone thrown out a tavern window in a fight, he desires a fight himself. These attempts are thwarted, however. Rather than fight with the Underground Man, an officer he meets casually shoves him aside. The Underground Man does not protest, even though he is not afraid of the physical damage that the officer could inflict on him. Rather, he lacks the "moral courage" to challenge the officer. The Underground Man, as a romantic, would use "literary language" with the officer, and he understands that the people in the tavern would humiliate him for doing so.

Rather than challenge the officer, the Underground Man becomes obsessed with the idea of revenge. He stalks the officer and gathers casual information about him. However, whenever the Underground Man sees the officer walking in the park, he gives way, so that the officer does not even notice his presence. Finally, the Underground Man decides that his revenge will come in refusing to give way to the officer, because then the officer will have to acknowledge his existence.

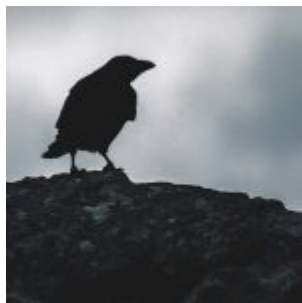
The Underground Man spends a long time preparing for this confrontation, resorting to borrowing money to purchase quality clothing—a hat, gloves, a shirt, and a fur collar—so that he will look like the officer's social equal. Even dressed in his fine clothes, however, the Underground Man cannot bring himself to bump into the officer. One day, he finally succeeds in walking straight into the officer, but the officer does not even seem to notice. At first, the Underground Man exults that he has placed himself on equal footing with the officer and preserved his own dignity. Three

days later, however, he feels the same shame he feels after every debauch. The Underground Man wonders what became of the officer: "Whom does he crush now?"

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Lyric or a Quote by Edgar
Allan Poe?



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Character List

CHARACTERS



The Underground Man: Character Analysis

CHARACTERS



Important Quotations Explained

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Review Quiz

FURTHER STUDY

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